

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE

LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL

ON

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 1794.

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Die Saturni, 1^o Martii, 1794.

ORDERED by the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in Parliament assembled, That the Thanks of this House be, and are hereby given to the Lord Bishop of Norwich, for the Sermon by him preached before this House yesterday, in the Abbey Church, Westminster; and that he be desired to cause the same to be forthwith printed and published.

GEORGE ROSE, Cler' Parliamentor'.

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LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL

IN THE

ABBAY CHURCH OF ST. PETER, WESTMINSTER,

ON FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 1794:

BEING

THE DAY APPOINTED

FOR A

G E N E R A L F A S T.

MANNERS SUTTON

BY

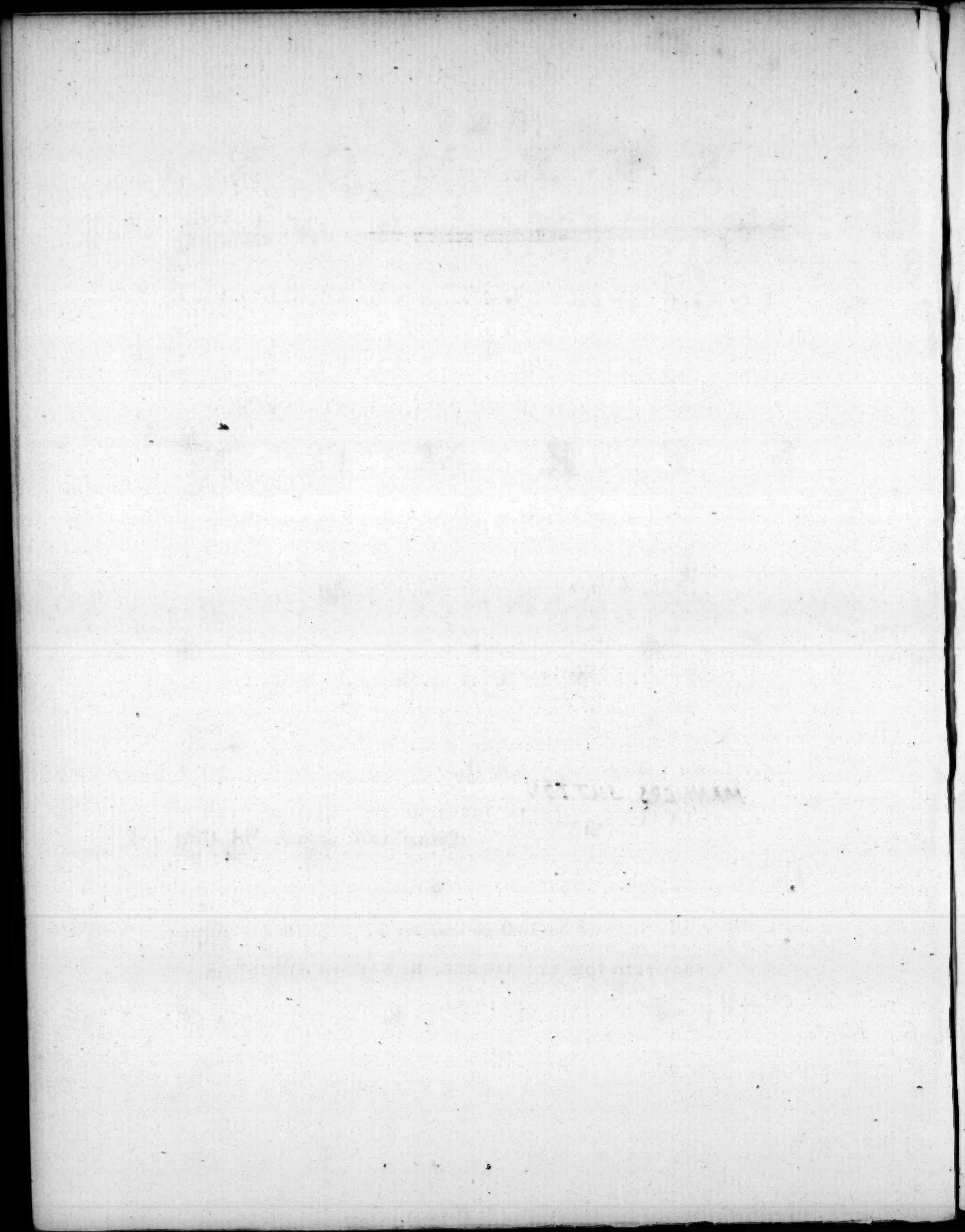
CHARLES, LORD BISHOP OF NORWICH.

Emari Coll. Camb. MA. 1780.

L O N D O N:

PRINTED FOR R. FAULDER, NEW BOND STREET.

1794.



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S E R M O N.

JOEL, Chapter II. 15th and 17th Verses.

Sanctify a fast. Call a solemn assembly. Let the priests and ministers of the Lord weep between the porch and the altar ; and let them say, Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them. Wherefore should they say, Where is their God ?

IN times of public difficulty and distress, all nations of all ages have sought protection from Heaven. The various appeals to which this spirit of devotion hath given rise, whether addressed to the One True God, or to the tutelary deities of

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Pagan Mythology, are agreed in confessing the insufficiency of human wisdom to control success, to avert impending danger, or to remove the pressure of national calamity. Where a consent of opinion prevails in defiance of opposite governments, religion, and manners, it is reasonable to conclude that such consent is enforced by some predominant principle of nature. A sense of human weakness, and a confidence in the superintending providence of Heaven, are natural to man.

It is not, perhaps, unworthy of remark, that in great emergencies, nations, however variously constituted, have not only agreed in humbling themselves before their respective altars, but have adopted, as if by one consent, the same mode and form of humiliation. The solemnity of Public Fasts is of general use, and of the remotest antiquity. The Israelites, in the infancy of their government, had frequent recurrence to it. Neither was it confined to the Mosaic dispensation. The deities of Greece and Rome were to be conciliated, or appeased, by Public Fasts. In the Christian æra the same solemnity obtained; not as the ordinance of Christ, but introduced at
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so early a period, that its agreement with the simplicity of the Gospel discipline cannot be doubted. If the inquiry be pursued beyond the limits of the Christian Church, the same species of devotion is found among the disciples of Confucius, and the worshippers of Mahomet. From the antiquity and general use of Public Fasts, it should seem that this solemnity is congenial with the first principles of devotion, and, I had almost said, is part of natural religion.

The occasions that have given rise to it, are as various as the calamities to which society is subject. Dearth, famine, pestilence, and among the greatest of social evils—War. It is among the greatest of social evils, because it carries in its train many of those to which I have alluded; and is connected with the worst passions of the human mind. The inclemency of the elements, and the wide waste of infectious disease, are less to be apprehended, because less frequent in return than the murderous conflicts of enraged nations. To enumerate the causes of war were a fruitless attempt; and indeed if they were capable of being numbered, the application of them would be matter of still greater difficulty. Wars are often

known to the many, only by the devastation and ravage they commit, where "the land before them is as the garden of Eden, and behind them as a desolate wilderness." But the sources from which they are derived are inscrutable to popular inquiry. Whether they originate from revenge, jealousy, ambition, caprice, policy, or, the only legitimate cause of war, self-defence, the same appeal is made to Heaven: and it is wisely made; because, be the merits of the contest what they may, we are not met to justify before God, but to humble ourselves at the Throne of Grace; not to proclaim, in the language of the Pharisee, "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are," but to confess our weakness, and implore his protection. It is not, however, to be dissembled, that there is a fundamental and substantial difference between the causes of war; whether they be considered in a political, or a moral point of view. The policy of war is a question at all times full of difficulty, comprehending a variety of matter, intricate and involved; the balance of power, the interests of commerce, the dignity and honour of nations, subjects by no means fitted for discussion in this place, and still less for triumph

umph or applause, but undoubtedly admitting many degrees of extenuation or reproof.

That the morals and religion of mankind should, under any posture of affairs, be interested in the support of war, may at first sight appear problematical. Religion hath often been violently pressed into the service, and compelled to bear the bloody standard of Ambition. Hence doubt and suspicion naturally arise whenever Religion is said to be connected with War. But it is not to be forgotten, if there be any truth in the records of Sacred History, the worship of the One True God hath in former days depended on the issue of battles. The same awful period may again return. Much hath been heard of the wisdom and philosophy of the times ; and we are flattered with assurances, founded on I know not what authority, that we are an enlightened people ; and in consequence protected from the follies and extravagance of darker ages. If the light insisted upon be the light of Revelation, the claim is an old and a just one ; but if they who profess to extend their horizon so far beyond the day-spring of their ancestors, be least disposed to accept or acknowledge the light of the Gospel, the

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claim is new, and certainly not so obvious. Human knowledge is always circulating ; the acquisitions of to-day are lost to future times, and again retrieved. To calculate on the progressive and unbroken improvement of ages is against experience : and indeed if no interruption take place, causes and their corresponding effects are not easily classed. The connection between them is too minute, or too remote to be of general observance ; and the same errors are perpetually revolving. Neither is it to be forgotten, that it is the proud distinction of modern philosophers to place less confidence in others than in themselves ; in the experience of ages than the experiment of the day. Whether this be proof of discretion, as it is said to be of courage, I shall not discuss. Be it as it may, the example of a neighbouring nation hath evinced, that in despite of this superior intelligence (of which they are supposed to possess at least their share) idolatry of a monstrous form may again rear its many heads against the worship of the One True God. Hence it appears, that the religion of mankind may be interested in the support, as in the conduct of war ; and the cause of war differ as widely in its moral as political description. We are taught, however, by our religion to hope, that the worst cause is not

excluded from the mercy of Heaven, and we know that the best will require it.

Under this impression it is not to be wondered at, if in all the variety of warfare to which we are subject, recurrence be uniformly had to the same Fountain of Mercy. But as it is accessible to all, so is it to be approached with humility, and not in the proud and hasty steps of confidence and self-approbation. For, whatever be the merits of the contest in which we are engaged, it were the excess of folly to presume that nothing culpable shall grow out of it. In national conflicts the passions of mankind are unavoidably let loose, and it too often happens, that the worst passions, because the strongest and most active, become predominant. It is the duty of religion to moderate and repress them; and unless this duty be fulfilled, the merits of the best cause are soon lost in the means of conducting it. If the progress of an armed force be invariably marked by plunder, devastation, murder, and inexorable revenge, the principles that gave motion to it are scarcely worth the inquiry: the best are disgraced by the calamities they engender.

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In the agitation and ferment of the public mind, inseparable from a state of warfare, it is the especial province of religion to inculcate temper, and moderation; and whether elated by victory, or depressed by misfortune, to restore the Nation to its proper level. For this purpose Public Fasts are ordained. In these solemn assemblies the Nation is called upon as one Man, seriously to recollect itself—to examine without passion, or prejudice, the motives that have led to its distresses, and the means employed to extricate it from them; and before it ventures to implore the succour of Heaven, to consider well whether it have not incurred the displeasure of Heaven. To depend totally on the counsels, the valour, the wisdom, the resources of the Nation, were an idle and a fond dependance; nor is it a safer policy to rest our hopes of success on the iniquities of those to whom we are opposed. National depravity is undoubtedly national weakness; but it is surely a much wiser principle to correct our own vices, than to presume on those of the adversary. The comparative merits and demerits of nations are not easily calculated; and, indeed,

indeed, if they were capable of estimate, it is still a question of doubt, whether it may not consist with the unsearchable wisdom of God to punish as in old times he hath punished, a vicious people, by a people still more vicious. Where, said the proud Assyrian, the blasphemer of the living God—
 “ Where is the King of Humath, and the King of Arphad ? ”
 The same unhallowed language may again prevail : and Cities, and Isles, and Nations be desolated, before the avenging angel smite the Assyrian camp. If there be no depravity among us, no corruption of morals, no impiety, our confidence in the wickedness of the enemy is well founded ; but if we share with them in the follies and vices of the age, it is absurd to presume on the degrees of unrighteousness.

I should much abuse the situation in which I stand, were I to dissemble with you, what is too palpable to be denied, that we are not an innocent nation ; nay, that we are an offending people. If it be imputed as a crime to France, that she is given to change, are we totally exempt from the spirit of innovation ? If it be charged to her, that she is infected by

a strange and a false philosophy, are we sure that the same infection have not tainted ourselves? If, to fill up the measure of her iniquity, France have rejected and blasphemed her Redeemer, is there nothing of infidelity in this land? In truth, we possess too small a portion of positive virtue, and comparative will avail little, to shield us from the consequences of a distempered and convulsed world: it is in repentance, and the mercy of God, that we must look for our protection.

Never was the language of the Prophet, since the day that gave utterance to it, more applicable than on the present occasion. "Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them: wherefore should they say, Where is their God?" The nation with whom we are at war, are professedly and boastfully an heathen nation; and unless it shall please God to spare his people, our laws, and liberty, and religion, are inevitably lost. It does not become the Minister of Peace to be an advocate for War; and if the question at issue were merely political,

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not a word of praise or extenuation should escape from this place. But can it be doubted, if the purposes of France be obtained, and her system extended wide as the range of her ambition, that we shall become the slaves of her power, and, what is worse, the companions of her infidelity? The political and mythological systems of France are inseparably connected. The Altar and the Throne fell together, and something hateful arose in the place of each; without names indeed, but of the nearest alliance: never was the bond of union between Church and State so strongly or so closely riveted; and, most assuredly, if one prevail, the other will quickly follow. Under the old government there existed men of great talent, painful research, and profound learning, who from conviction, or perhaps not unfrequently from the love of the praise of men, better than the praise of God, disbelieved, or denied the evidence of Revelation. There is something extremely flattering to an ardent mind in the opposition to inveterate opinions. Scepticism is at all times better calculated for the display of a brilliant imagination, than a sober and sedate consent with the established Faith. But what are

the grounds of infidelity at this day? Are the teachers of apostacy men of learning and research? or have they been suddenly raised to their present exalted stations from the bottom of society, and the depth of ignorance, by the agitation of the times? It will not, I trust, be considered as an uncharitable conjecture, if I venture to state it as possible, that the present rulers of France reject Christianity, not because they disbelieve it, but profess to disbelieve it because it is convenient to reject it. Infidelity, if it have any claim to sincerity, is the result of diligent investigation, for which neither the persons are qualified, nor the times fitted. To reconcile the doctrines of Christ with the principles of anarchy, was an hopeless attempt: they knew it to be impossible that order should unite with confusion, or rapine and murder with charity and brotherly love. It was indispensably necessary to their purpose, that the belief of Christianity should be totally eradicated. And they were not at the pains, nor indeed could they spare time, to examine the records and monuments of antiquity to colour and gloss their decrees. It is easier to calumniate, than to refute evidence or establish fact. Fanaticism

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and Priestcraft were found to be words of such potent effect, that all argument ceased to be necessary, and the faith of ages was at once swept away by the magic of these frightful sounds. Had the exertions of France been confined to the reform of her Church, a good Christian would have looked on, not without anxiety, indeed, but with the pious hope for her return to the simplicity of the Gospel. What have we seen? Not a reform, but a total annihilation of her Church—Not a return to the simplicity of the Gospel, but a denial of Christ. Aware that in rejecting the Revelation of the Gospel they relinquished all pretensions to a future state of happiness; and sensible, perhaps, that the expectation of another life might retard their purposes by endangering their means, they boldly proclaimed death to be perpetual sleep. “Wherefore hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men that rule this people. Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with Death, and with Hell are we at agreement; your covenant with Death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with Hell shall not stand: when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.” *Isaiah XXVIII. 14, 15.*

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To every considerate mind, the situation of the Christian World cannot but afford much anxiety. Hitherto we have been accustomed to contemplate the gradual progress of Christianity; to trace its advancement with pious exultation, to the remotest corners of the globe. At this day, our astonishment is excited by bold and daring attempts to suppress it, even in the heart of Europe. These attempts will ultimately result to the glory of God: but the interval is most awful; big with events, at which humanity shudders, and Faith herself is half confounded. Good men can scarcely credit them, wise men are at a loss to account for them, and pious men are afraid to touch them.

What is it that hath been substituted in the place of Christianity? Is it of new invention, or hath it been raked from the ashes of some Pagan temple? Are the mythologists of the present day, men of original genius, or have they clumsily imitated their heathen ancestors?—It matters not.—The system, be its origin what it may, is calculated, and, I fear, intended, to confound right with wrong; to obliterate the first and best impressions of the human mind; to dissipate all fear, and to
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extinguish all love of God. In a word, it is the reverse of the Christian religion. A system shaped in wickedness, and conceived in sin.

Thus hath a great nation completed its own ruin ; and, in the downfall of its grandeur, made shipwreck of the virtues, the morals, and the religion of the people. Order may again be restored, but the faith of the many will with difficulty be brought back. National faith is not the result of individual research ; it is taken on credit, strengthened by early habits, and confirmed by opinion. In the instance before us the tradition is broken, the habits of the people are changed, and opinion is utterly demolished. It is not the corrupted faith of a degenerate people that we lament, but the broad foundation on which all national faith, however pure, must rest. I mean that confidence in superiors which flows from voluntary respect, accompanies sanctity of character, and is maintained by wisdom and integrity.

Against this torrent of wickedness and folly we are now to make head ; convinced, that if the smallest breach be suffered,
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it may and will burst in upon us with irresistible violence, and in defiance of all our exertions deluge the land.

Before I conclude I shall call back your attention for one moment to the origin and cause of the war. It is not aggrandizement, it is not the balance of power, the extension of trade, the dignity or honour of the nation ; it is the defence of our homes and families, of our laws, our liberty, and above all our religion. In this momentous conflict, our first and last dependence is on Him, whom, in the paroxysm of their rage, the enemy hath rejected and blasphemed. It is God alone who can give nerve and strength to our arms, and wisdom and effect to our counsels.

Be favourable, O Lord ! be favourable to thy people, who turn to thee in weeping, fasting, and praying. And whilst thou lookest down ^{upon us} with compassion, let not thy mercy be withdrawn from them, to whom we are opposed : but bring them back, O God, to a just sense of thy almighty power, and to a pure and sincere faith in the merits and sufferings of

thy Son. Then shall the horrors of war cease, the bow be broken, and the spear knapped in funder; true religion shall resume her place, and the blessings of peace be restored to an infatuated and distracted nation.

THE END.

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